

Research on Dilthey's Hermeneutics of Life

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Abstract: Dilthey propounds human sciences in his critique of traditional metaphysics and natural sciences. The hermeneutics of life, the essential approach in the inquiry of human sciences, focuses on human life to construct the interrelations among lived experience, understanding, and expression. The idea that life is an organism is introduced based on the connection between the individual life and the universal life of general human beings. There are three hierarchical forms of manifestation of life: “concepts, judgments, and larger thought-formations,” actions, and the expression of lived experience. There is a proximity between the expression of lived experience and the nature of life, of which the expression of lived experience is the most significant manifestation of life in the human sciences. Lived experience has an immediacy that delivers direct and immediate access to reality, whereas understanding is indirect and requires further mediation. Understanding has two forms: the elementary and the higher. Based on the hermeneutics of life, Dilthey's human sciences can be approached as a reply to the contemporary cultural crisis.

Keywords: Dilthey, life, hermeneutics.

1. Introduction

Based on the critique of historicism, Dilthey proposes human sciences as an independent subject founded on the methodology of hermeneutics of life. This unique methodology distinguishes human sciences from natural sciences. Life is the ultimate object of hermeneutical study and has several notable qualities. Life is a nexus that coheres to individuality and holism. For life in the sense of the individual, life is an internal experience, a consciousness of oneself. The consciousness of each individual is formed by relating oneself to the holistic external world. [1] The commonality of individual life introduces the holism of life – the universal life of human beings encompassing every individual life. The coherence between the individuality and holism of life further reveals the historical nature of life. The temporality of life is disclosed in the historical aspect of life, indicating that life is a real process rather than an abstract natural sciences concept. The temporality of life is also represented in the objectification of life, namely, the lived experience, the most significant manifestation of life. [2]

Dilthey's hermeneutics is grounded on the interrelations among three aspects of life: lived experience, understanding and expression. Lived Experience is the direct perception of the external world. It is the basis for understanding and the precondition for one to have consciousness of themselves. Because of the aforementioned nexus nature of life, each individual's lived experience must relate to the holistic universal life of all human beings due to universal humanity. This

connection further justifies the fundamental understanding of distinguishing human sciences from natural sciences. As a unique aspect of human sciences, understanding requires interactions with real categories derived from life, such as values, meanings, purposes, etc., often followed by emotional responses. Hermeneutics is the medium that universally explains the understanding of manifestations of life and applies to all texts. Therefore, the hermeneutics of life is the fundamental methodology and the foundation of human sciences, focusing on human life.

2. Life

2.1. Human sciences and life as an organism

Dilthey's human sciences focus on the life of human beings. Unlike the objective study of the relationship between human beings and nature carried out by the natural sciences, human sciences begins and centres on the life of human beings. Life consists of two senses: holistic and individual. It is worth mentioning that Dilthey limits life in the context of human sciences to human life and, on this basis, delineates different definitions of human life on the physical and psychological levels. Life at the psychological level is defined as "constituents of the socio-historical world," [1] emphasizing that life at this level is the individual's care for the self. Exploring the meaning of psychic life is an essential task of Dilthey's human science. [3] The holistic life is the universal life of all human beings. The progression of an individual's life inevitably interacts with other individuals' lives, forming intersections. Collecting all intersections generates systems over individuals, and the sum of the systems together forms human society and history. As mentioned above, life "resists universalization in confronting itself as its own life," the individual life, which is embodied in the life of the individual entity that corresponds to each human being. [4] Thus, for life, each individual is a necessary part of holism, and holism is simultaneously present in the development of each individual. Dilthey claims life as an organism because of the cyclical process between every unique individual life and the holism they constitute, accompanied by continuous changes and evolutions.

Life is an organism that reflects one of its fundamental characteristics – a process consisting of continuous developments and changes. Temporality is the sign of individual life being a process, of which each individual life endlessly experiences the present as "the filling of a moment of time with reality." [1] Because the present is always the period one experiences, Dilthey deduces that the temporality of each individual is complete by itself. The completeness of time is a prerequisite for the possession of a complete life. Similarly, the collection of the temporalities of each individual life, in turn, constitutes the historicity that marks the flow of life as a whole. In Dilthey's theory of human sciences, regardless of the specification to which it is referred, the essence inherent in life returns to the spirit. Unlike the abstract concepts in traditional metaphysical theories, the spirit in human sciences is not one's self-consciousness but what they have with themselves, namely the inner world. The inner world is formed because of the same ultimate goal common to all activities in developing every human life – creating spiritualities. Because of the connection between the individual and holistic, the spirituality of life exists in the combination of individual reality and integrated history. Dilthey asserts that it is only in the spiritual world that life acquires value, meaning and purpose. [3] In summary, the study of life focuses on correlation, embodied in the relationship between the part and the whole of life, that is, the correlation between the individual life and the holistic life, as well as the correlation between temporality and historicity. Therefore, life as a nexus is also an important feature in Dilthey's concept of life.

2.2. Manifestations of Life

Dilthey suggests that manifestations of life arise in the ongoing interplay between lived experience and one's understanding of self. Humans recognize and display their spiritual world through subjective life manifestations, which have the following three hierarchically distinct forms.

The first manifestation of life is “concepts, judgments, and larger constituents of thought,” [1] which are parts that construct scientific theories. They arise through lived experience and subsequently exist apart from lived experience. The essential characteristic of this form is its logical character. Using judgment as an example, Dilthey clarifies the categories of understanding corresponding to this manifestation level. Judgment relates only to the object that is being contemplated and is meant to express the efficacy of that object. Judgment is not affected by anything else, including lived experience, where it was generated from. Dilthey forms an analogy between the relation of judgment between the person who formulates it and the person who understands it and the transportation, emphasizing that during the process, the judgment is completely transformed from possessing by who formulated it to being possessed by who understands it. This analogy implies the judgment's homogeneity or universal efficacy so that the understanding of a judgment is limited to its logical content. This understanding, though complete, is inapplicable to life and is, therefore, the fundamental manifestation of life.

The second form of manifestation of life is actions. Although actions do not appear for a definite purpose, they must contain at least one purpose. A purpose is the spirituality of the action. Dilthey emphasizes that the understanding of actions is necessarily based on a distinction – it is generated by a state of mind, whether settled on the external world or ruled by the internal nexus of life. The former is the immediate factor that prompts an act, while the latter is the fundamental source of that act since the latter is restrained by the former. The distinction features the limitation of actions in terms of lacking completeness, in which no action can be generated by two kinds of state of mind at the same time. Therefore, although actions are associated with life, this incomplete association can only be defined as an intermediate level of understanding, merely above logic.

The third form of manifestation of life is the expression of lived experience. It is the most significant manifestation reflecting on life's essence, which Dilthey claims is the constitutive unit of psychic life. The expression of lived experience is formed within the relations among life as the medium of the lived experience, the lived experience itself, and the understanding of lived experience. As such, the nexus of life encompassed in the expression of lived experience is far beyond the reach of consciousness. By comparing the judgment of the expression of lived experience with that of the fundamental manifestation of life, Dilthey suggests that the nature of expression creates gaps between understanding and the content of expression. They cannot be defined in the same way because only facticity is concerned with the expression of lived experience, regardless of its truth value. According to Dilthey, the inauthentic expression of lived experience is driven solely by practical interests, such as disguises and lies, whereas the authentic expression of lived experience can only exist in great works of art and culture. The spiritual content that originates from these works then exists independently of their creator, who, as a human being, always possesses the real-life expression of inauthentic experience. Therefore, Dilthey believes that the spiritual content of great works of art and culture is true. [1]

3. Hermeneutics of life

3.1. Lived experience

Lived experience is a crucial concept in Dilthey's hermeneutics that is closely related to life and time. Considering every present in the flow of time as a unity, it becomes an element that can be

experienced. Thus, in terms of temporality, lived experience is the smallest unit that constitutes life in the flow of time. Moreover, experience is also a relatively large unit of life on account of memories. Through memory, lived experiences, the smallest units in life, which share some common attributes, are combined to form more complex lived experiences, such as the stages of one's life. This kind of lived experience that is derived from divisions of life proves that lived experiences are inherent in life.

There are two important features of lived experience: there is no dichotomy between the subjectivity and the objectivity of the lived experience and its directness. Lived experience is a unit of life, indicating that it is entailed in life and proving the negation of the dichotomy. Dilthey argues that lived experience cannot exist independently of its specific content, and introspection cannot grasp it. Lived experience always directly presents its content. It is non-conceptual as being liberated from the concept-constructing process practiced in natural sciences. It is important to clarify the directness of lived experience. The non-introspectiveness and, thus, the directness of lived experience does not mean excluding them from lived experience since Dilthey has referred to memory as a form of introspecting, which is necessary for grasping lived experience. Instead, the directness of lived experience only emphasizes that introspection is unnecessary for one to obtain the content of lived experience. Even though memory is involved in grasping lived experience, it is an inclusive part of life. Therefore, the involvement of memory cannot suggest that the study of human sciences employs the same way of concept-related introspection as the study of natural sciences. The directness of the lived experience is reinforced by the fact that one can only acquire a nonrepetitive lived experience at the moment. [5] The study of human sciences is centred on human life, and the essence of life is lived experience. Thus, the study of lived experience is essential for comprehending human sciences.

3.2. Understanding and Hermeneutics

Understanding is another significant concept in Dilthey's hermeneutics. Unlike common sense, Dilthey's understanding contains the following essential qualities. Understanding is an indirect process from the outside in. One who pursues an understanding must draw on particular external objects, such as symbols and forms, to grasp the inner thoughts and spirits. The indirectness of understanding is revealed in three aspects. First, despite direct internal experience being the object of hermeneutical study, the thinking process necessary for grasping such experience is indirect. Second, internal experience neither contains one's individual experience nor enables one to recognize one's differences from others. Those lacking in internal experience can only be completed through understandings formed by comparing with others. Thus, the necessity of comparison suggests the indirectness of understanding. Third, one may be alienated or surprised by the sentiments of the self. If one seeks to understand these kinds of sentiments, one needs to return to the indirect process of receiving via senses in response to the external world.

There are two forms of understanding: elementary and advanced. The elementary form of understanding construes a particular manifestation of life, such as a symbol or an act. It is an inference formed within the relations among the particular manifestation of life, its content, its expression and the content of that expression. The advanced form of understanding is developed on account of its elementary form. It is improved by overcoming the uncertainties of understanding a particularly distant manifestation of life. The advanced form of understanding arises from reconsidering contradictory or confusing elementary understandings, which involve more than one manifestation of life and may even require one to return to the nexus of life to seek the solution. It expands the scope of understanding from the relations among a single manifestation of an individual's life and the same individual who seeks to understand it to relations among multiple manifestations of others and the nexuses of their lives. Inductive inference is no longer suitable for accomplishing the advanced form of understanding, which requires deductive inference.

Understanding great works of art and culture is an important part of the advanced form of understanding, which reflects the special connection between lived experience and understanding. Unlike other advanced forms of understanding, this particular understanding is not based on the relationship between the manifestation and its content. Instead, it reflects the elementary form of understanding and is based on the relationship between the expression and its content. To understand an entire great work begins with understanding parts of it and then combining those separated parts. Take reading a great novel as an example; the reader is immersed in the plot. At this moment, all understandings formed by the reader are under the scope of the work to the exclusion of connecting to the author. Furthermore, because of the commonality shared by the lives of all human beings, the reader understands a complete reality of the possible world created by the author that exists only within the work. The reader is transposed from the manifestation of their own life to the manifestation of a specific life in the work. By manifesting their life to the understanding of a part of the work, the reader re-experiences something beyond their real life. Re-experiencing is an inside-and-out process, the exact opposite of the process that forms other common understandings. The advanced form of understanding of great works arises when the viewer realizes that the author created the reality in the work they understand and re-experiences. [6] Hermeneutics is the practical embodiment of understanding, the basic methodology of human sciences. The two necessary conditions for practicing hermeneutics are the evolving manifestation of life and the understanding that enables the return to any specific manifestation of life. Understanding is bounded by certain rules in both conditions and forms a systematic methodology. [1]

4. Conclusion

Dilthey proposes the theory of human sciences as a reply to his critique of traditional metaphysics and natural sciences. The hermeneutics of life is not only the foundation of human sciences but also the core research methodology of hermeneutics of life. [6] It seems that "the hermeneutic circle" is a flaw in traditional hermeneutics, a problem that must be solved. Dilthey proposes a new understanding of the "hermeneutic circle" that instead reflects the nature of hermeneutics of life as a method for studying human sciences. The "hermeneutic circle" is a logical paradox between understanding and hermeneutics, the part and the whole. Understanding and hermeneutics must begin by building on the content of the parts. However, the part has a meaning that needs to be in relation to the whole only if it exists within the whole, and having meaning is the precondition for the part to be understood. Therefore, understanding the whole must precede understanding of the part. This conclusion logically contradicts the initial premise, leading to a non-starter of understanding and hermeneutics by "wavering between the singular and whole without deciding for one over the other." [6] However, according to Dilthey, the logical paradox of "the hermeneutic circle" is based on the false assumption that the relation between the part and the whole is a single unidirectional. Instead, he believes that the relationship between the part and the whole should be a multidirectional reciprocity of multiple relationships. First, as a living individual, the one who seeks to understand will form a unique understanding based on one's personal experience. This particular individual also acts as a part of a larger whole, such as a family and a society; a universal human life consists of many individuals. Similarly, the object for understanding is both a complete entity and a part of a larger whole. A work, for example, is a whole in itself, but it must be situated in a particular time and cultural context. Dilthey suggests that the only prerequisite for understanding is the objective spirit. The objective spirit exists in every life and has been created and evolved by human beings throughout history, denoting it to the same entities. The newborn individual, living in this world with objective spirits, gradually acquires the common objective spirits of life and develops the objective spirits of their individual life from it. Understanding and hermeneutics thus exist in the correlation of the part and the whole. [7]

Overcoming the crisis of culture is the essential practical value of Dilthey's human sciences. The crisis of culture originates from the incoherence between industrial culture and human life. Industrial technologies bound to natural sciences have evolved into a form of culture that dominates society. Industrial culture has tottered religion and ethics, pushing people to abandon traditions and customs. The positivism and empiricism that emerged from this kind of culture carried on indifference to human beings and thus incapable of providing satisfying answers to questions in the inquiry of humankind. Dilthey's theory of human sciences is a philosophy of culture that proposes overcoming the cultural crisis. He believed that the questions raised in contemplating the origin of human life, the meaning of existence, and all other questions regarding values explore human beings' nature. Answers to those questions can only be found by returning to human life. Human sciences are parallel to natural sciences, and the hermeneutics of life therein is parallel to the natural sciences' study methods. [8] Therefore, Dilthey's philosophy of culture is an independent epistemological theory and systematic methodology constructed in parallel with natural sciences that complements the spiritual needs of human beings.

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